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Shotguns and firearms in the UK: A call for a distinctively sociological contribution to the debate

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Abstract

The outcome of a UK government's Home Affairs select committee's discussion of the regulation of gun ownership called for reform. The impetus for the review was the recent shootings in Cumbria and Northumberland of 2010. This paper challenges why the social science community has had little to say about the legal ownership and use of guns in the UK and argues that opportunities to shape the debate have been lost. This paper demonstrates that there is a substantial knowledge-base, but that this is ecological and environmental rather than political or sociological. It suggests that a distinctively sociological analysis is needed if the complexity of participation in shooting is to be understood. This paper explores three specific aspects of the topic: (1) legal and policy aspects, (2) methodological issues and (3) the meaning and activity of participation in shooting. All are discussed critically as a means to stimulate sociological discussion.

Keywords

Countrysports, firearms, shooting, shotguns, sociology

Introduction

‘You only have to look at the plethora of UK magazines that cater for the ‘legitimate gun owner’ to see that the shooting lobby is as much part of the psychologically flawed and deeply dangerous gun culture as any city gang. Guns and killing are glamourised [*sic*] – the only difference is that the participants are wearing tweed jackets rather than hoodies.’

(Chris Gale, in a letter to the *Western Daily Press*, quoted in the *Shooting Times*, September 2007:9)

Game shooting, as a country sport, is a highly emotive subject (Burchardt and Conford 2008, Hastings 2003, Heley 2010). In the wake of the ban on hunting with dogs, debates surrounding the legitimacy of country sportsⁱ have intensified. Yet despite sustained campaigns by both pro and anti-shooting interest groups and relatively highly emotive press coverageⁱⁱ, little sociological academic research has engaged with that controversy, nor with the very activity of game shooting itself (Hillyard 2007a, b). This absence of social science and sociological attention upon country sports (such as game shooting) led the last sustained enquiry into the activity to suspect that the ‘dead hand’ of political correctness was at play (Cox et al. 1996). That is, the perception of elitism combined with the emotively charged

issue of gun use has served to distance the academy, and dissuade it from commentary. Game shooting is, without question, an exclusive sport (cf. Hillyard 2007b, Heley 2010, Mingay 1976), despite repeated claims to the contrary from pro-shooting organisations (British Association for Shooting and Conservation (BASC) 2010). This, combined with sociology's historical preference for researching the 'underdog' or disadvantaged groups or relatively mainstream pastimes and leisure activities, has marginalised research into rather more elitist social formsⁱⁱⁱ (Ball 1994, Allan 2006, Delamont 1984, Newby et al. 1978). Given the politicisation of many rural practices during former New Labour Governments, sociology's relative silence on the organisations and politics of – as well as the operation of forms of social or cultural capital involved in – is something that needs to be addressed.

The current government review's recommendations^{iv} provide an opportunity for comment for a discipline with an ambition to fulfil a policy-relevant and public role (cf. British Sociological Association 2010, Burawoy 2005, Mills 1959). In the interests of beginning to formulate a role for sociology in contributing to public understandings of shooting, this paper offers a three-pronged analysis. It: (a) introduces the current legal and policy framework of gun ownership (i.e. how readily can a gun be legally acquired?); (b) moves to empirically consider one form of legal gun use (game shooting, the least regulated) and finally (c) discusses the draw of participating in such a 'sport'? This challenges whether or not gun ownership and use is itself problematic, in terms of the perceived physical dangers associated with gun misuse, and also the role of participation more generally.

Context

The UK countryside has long been a contested space, following the Wildlife and Countryside Act in 1981 and subsequent upheavals, such as foot-and-mouth disease, BSE, the hunting ban and the legality of the impending badger cull, also demonstrate (Burchardt and Conford 2008, Burridge 2008; Wallwork and Dixon 2004; Woods 2003; Thomas 1983). Yet, despite such attention, the very meaning of 'the rural' has remained elusive. That is, what constitutes and characterises rural living, rural spaces, and even rural occupations and the analysis of social class, are at best blurred and certainly ambiguous (Murdoch et al. 2003, Phillips 2007). The theoretical representation of the rural continues to be debated (Newby 1985, 2008, Halfacree 2007) and recent commentators have identified a differentiated countryside that resists ascribing any essentialism to rural localities or communities (Murdoch et al. 2003, Murdoch 2006, Delanty 2010, Neal and Walters 2008).

In the face of such controversy and complexity, empirical researchers could be forgiven for wanting to avoid such slippery territories as rural and rural community research altogether (Neal and Walters 2006). Yet rural empirical research has enjoyed something of a renaissance within the UK^v, as viewed by the number of sub-disciplinary specialisms now emerging (cf. animal-human relations; children and youth in rural spaces; gender and rurality; politics and the rural; and even the sometimes problematic valorisation of rurality and locality in relation to sustainable food production (Winter 2003). In respect to country sports, the agenda has been reactive in terms of responding to Government, research council and interest-group sponsored research in relation to hunting (cf. Milbourne 2003a and b; Cox et al. 1994a, Ward 1999). In respect to game shooting, the work of Cox et al. (1994b, 1996) is an exception, but by their own admission they failed to fully realise their task to trace the economic role of game shooting and their remit explicitly excluded consideration of social motivations and perceptions. Therefore, there is an absence of a distinctively sociological account of country sports, with the result that the public understandings of the issues involved have been shaped by the interest groups surrounding such activities. Therefore the territories

of knowledge/discourse generated on these topics bear the stamp of public relations activities of pro-/anti- types in their various campaigns and there remains a gap or role for sociology here.

(1) The policy context: legal gun ownership and regulation in the UK

In examining the way in which debates such as that over hunting were constructed by pro and anti- groups, the symmetry of the campaign materials assumed a repetitive, cyclical nature – indeed to the extent that this very repetition was used to fuel opponents’ arguments^{vi} and the economic card is often heralded. Indeed, in the UK context where a reformed Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) is moving to champion diversification, leisure and sustainability over traditional agriculture, any activity that reputedly contributes £1.6 billion to the economy (PACEC 2006) warrants detailed exploration. Blurring into this, the ecological question of land use and management (the central remit of Cox et al.’s ESRC-funded research in the nineteen nineties), raises the challenge of whether “these unchecked, murderous activities really [are] a fair use of the countryside for everyone” (League Against Cruel Sports (LACS) 2008). The issue of access, and recent ‘right to roam’ legislation, also introduces a potential tension for the conservational and ecological argument central to pro-shooting scientific research-orientated charities such as the Game and Wildlife Conservation Trust (Potts et al. 2010).

There can be little question that part of the history of game law legislation in the UK was underpinned by protecting the landowners’ hunting grounds from poachers, feather or fur (Griffin 2007). Yet there has been, in contrast to other policy fields, relatively little amendment to the Gun Laws in England and Wales until the twentieth century. Post-WWII, the number of ‘trophy’ handguns (i.e. unregistered) was addressed by legalisation restricting their legality (Firearms Act 1920, 1937) and managed by various government-led Police gun amnesties. The possibility of illegal use, of course, remains however, further complicated by the plentiful (if somewhat salacious) media interest in gun crime, despite important critiques having been made of the ‘media effects’ debate on violence (e.g. Barker and Petley 2001), as well as a policy and criminological interest in illegal firearm usage by criminal gangs (Hales et al. 2006; Bennett and Holloway 2004) and incidence of gunshot injury (Persad et al. 2005).

The notion that representations of violence, and violent practices, assert some effect upon those that encounter them persists in public debates about such disparate practices as rap music, horror fiction and now country sports. Specifically recent UK policy concerns relating to gun crime often make express connections to such media ‘effects’ debates, most recently Keith Vaz’s^{vii} addition of an amendment to the review concerning children. For instance, a recent UK Advertising Standards Authority ruling specifically addressed concerns about visual media (ASA 2007) in the context of billboard advertisement for the feature film *Shoot ’Em Up*, and the extent to which this material implied both a sense of threat and of glamour. The UK shooting community has, inevitably, already responded to the attention focused upon legitimate gun ownership by devising its own, self-regulating code of conduct in preference to any imposed legislation as well as contributing a specific response to the review. In notable contrast, the US and Canadian shooting communities enjoy more embedded and confident cultural and policy statuses (cf. NRA^{viii} and Wall 2008).

The UK shooting community’s move to pre-empt government imposed regulation ‘in the field’ is the Code of Good Shooting Practice (to which all of the significant players are aligned) (cf. BASC code of practice). As such, it is of interest in terms of understanding how

the community^{ix} constructs itself and the key issues. It is a much broader document than expressly concerning the physical act of firing a shotgun and addresses the entire process – from ‘field to fork’, that is, from shooting field etiquette to ensuring game is able to enter the food chain. This echoes Cox et al.’s (1994) call for shooting to be perceived and evaluated beyond a simplistic economic equation. By introducing a social dimension, any attack on shooting becomes involved in a much wider debate surrounding rurality and rural ‘ways of life.’ That is, the value that is placed upon the rural; what role it performs and; how it is (mis)understood.^x It is not enough to simply ask who legally has access to guns or firearms. Instead we need to understand how they are used in practice and then how the practice is regulated in spaces that are (notably) under-policed (Neal and Walters 2008). Therefore penetrating questions about how country sports sit inside rural lifestyles and cultural forms are yet to be asked, and a sociological imagination can begin to ask and answer them.

Country sports are diverse, so this paper now considers one form – that of game shooting – with the intention of providing focus and clarity. In terms of acquisition, the current legislation regarding gun licenses offers a straightforward distinction between firearm and shotgun^{xi}. These certificates, issued by the Chief Constable of the county within which the applicant is resident, permit the owner to possess rifles or shotguns of varying calibres and bores, the typical being 12 or 20 bore for game shooting (wildfowling, may require a larger bore for goose shooting, for example). The processes through which such certificates are acquired are rigorous, requiring referees, a home Firearms/ Police officer visit^{xii} and a declaration by the applicant. Southern counties’ attempt to withdraw home visits for certificate renewals drew national coverage (BBC 2011). A fee is charged (£50) and appropriately secure storage needs to be demonstrated (i.e. a gun cabinet bolted to an internal wall.) If successful, the licensee is then able to purchase shotguns and ammunition at registered dealers. In addition, an account of use needs to be provided. That is, applicants must demonstrate membership of a clay ground gun club, of a game shooting syndicate and provide details of whose land they enjoy permission to shoot over, or show that pest control on their own land warrants a licence. The calibre and type of firearm or shotgun is assessed for its appropriateness to the task and terrain (i.e. deer, fox and rabbit requiring different calibres of rifle). Notable here is the ban on the general ownership and use of handguns, introduced after the Dunblane, massacre in 1996^{xiii} even for those training to compete in culturally-celebrated events, such as the British Olympic shooting team.

In danger of being lost among such bureaucratic procedure is the criticism *that no further qualification for the ownership of these is required* (LACS 2011a). That is, you do not need to have passed a ‘proficiency test’ to go shooting. Nevertheless, in the absence of regular media reports of shootings by licensed owners, gun ownership in the twenty-first century is arguably for the most part therefore safe and self-regulating. At the same time, it is important to acknowledge that in cases in which legal shotguns are misused the consequences are extremely serious. For instance, we can point to the deaths following the Cumbria shootings in the summer of 2010 and also the inquest into the shooting of Mark Sanders at his residence by armed police in London.^{xiv} In specific respect to game shooting, the technology of the shotgun is little changed from the invention of the breech-loader in the mid-nineteenth century and semi-automatics are now restricted to three cartridges (a conventional shotgun is double-barrelled). Whilst it is therefore not sophisticated (as for example firearms), its safe-use depends largely upon the informal acquisition and application of knowledge and hence self-regulation. The dynamics of such self-regulation should constitute prime sociological territory, and the paper now raises some questions about the specific activity of game shooting.

(2) A research agenda for game shooting: issues of access and partiality

BASC (the largest of the pro-shooting lobby organisations) advocates “sensible, safe and workable firearms legislation” but as we have seen safety is self-regulated in respect to game shooting (BASC 2010). Immediately, it is clear that shooting takes place in rural spaces, which limits the range of demographic categories of person who participate regularly due to the concentration of multiple generations of migrant community in more obviously urban environments (Phillips 1998). It is therefore immediately exclusive, prior to any engagement with gun-use. The physical practice of shotgun use takes two main forms: clay (pigeon) and game. The latter is the focus here, as the former is heavily stage-managed,^{xv} (although the distinction is under-appreciated by Heley 2010). Game shooting, as the name suggests, refers not only to the quarry species – game (pheasant, grouse, partridge in the main^{xvi}), but the context of and environment in which this takes place. These birds are shot in flight (‘on the wing’) in the wild and the practice is inevitably different in context and form and opens up questions of regulation (the rural space; the conduct of safe gun-handling; the definition of a ‘sporting bird’^{xvii}).

Sociology possesses a sophisticated set of tools for unravelling and analysing the range of techniques of self-presentation, impression management, identity work, aligning actions that are involved in the rhetorical activity undertaken by interested parties – both those involved in the practice, and those hostile to it (for instance Anderson and Taylor 2010; Monaghan 2008; Loseke 2007; Stokes and Hewitt 1976; Scott and Lyman 1968; Goffman 1959; Sykes and Matza 1957; Mills 1940). An exploration of these issues needs to sit alongside those aspects of shooting that have already been explored, such as the economic (PACEC 2006), ecological (Potts et al. 2010) and political (Woods 2008) dimensions. The task becomes to open up new ways of exploring – to provide a jolt or the “slight surprise of action found in every encounter” (Thrift 2010, p. 198).

Without wishing to be excessively confessional, we feel that a degree of reflection upon our own positionality is necessary at this point. This is complicated in that we offer very different insider and outsider perspectives. One of us is a ‘card-carrying’ member and participant of the shooting community whereas the other is avowedly hostile to the killing of non-human animals for either sport or food. Despite these opposing stances, we are committed to generating informed, penetrating, and meaningful, questions in order to seek an understanding of shooting which is sociologically informed.

Foremost unpinning a sociological analysis is the fact that game shooting resists ready comparison to any other sport, rural or otherwise. A point of contrast demonstrates both why this is the case, as well as its exclusive character. Unlike swimming^{xviii}, where you can buy a costume and go to any public baths relatively cost-effectively and easily, shooting requires far more paraphernalia and organisation. In addition to an ownership licence (£50), the costs are high. For instance, an entry-level shotgun would cost about £100, cartridges (box of 25, circa £10) and booking a place to shoot (as it is unlikely that you will be given permission to shoot game free of charge on private land). So the price of the most competitively priced day’s shooting (at ‘a rough shoot’^{xix}) with a small anticipated bag,^{xx} would retail at circa £250 per gun.^{xxi} In the background to this are the more problematic ‘associated costs’ that Ward (1999) failed to capture in respect to hunting (cf. Hillyard 2007b). These include transport (as one of Heley’s (2010:327) respondent’s noted, “my Merc would soon get stuck and covered in shit”), attire appropriate for the elements and etiquette, a tip^{xxii} for the ‘keeper, and, should you be working your dog that day,^{xxiii} the associated costs of dog-ownership (and training).

Collectively, the cost, organisation and pre-planning involved in game shooting mean that considerable – even long-term – commitment is required. Hence, as the BASC's (2010) argument that whilst the current UK recession would impact upon people's capacity to engage in shooting, it was not an activity that people readily 'gave up' but were invested in for the longer-term. That commitment involves financial as well as personal investment begins to unravel the complexity of involvement in game shooting and the participatory appeal of a country pursuit embedded in the rural economy (PACEC 2006) or – for its detractors – involving the wholesale mass slaughter of birds (cf. LACS 2011a). To once again use the example of an entry-level driven-day of game shooting: The day is arranged into drives (where birds are progressively flushed towards a row of guns by a walking team of 'beaters'). Five drives would be possible (weather and daylight permitting) during the day, which would equate to ten birds being on average shot per drive, averaging at just over one bird per gun, per drive. The arrangement of the day is that the order of the lines of guns rotates (by which 'peg' the gun stands). For instance, moving up two pegs per drive: so say you drew^{xxiv} 5 to start with, you would move: 5, 7, 1, 3, 5. For nearly half that day you would expect to be 'out of the shooting' – i.e. towards the periphery of the line over which the birds were to be driven. With a strong ratio of say 3:1 (shots to birds), you would have used a little over a box of cartridges (25). Spread over the whole day, this would neither be non-stop nor evenly-spread out individual shooting (assuming you had the opportunity to shoot your proportion of the bag^{xxv}, which is never a given). A Gun would therefore not be doing as much shooting as a 'sporting round' at a clay ground (50 clays).

Offering this detail here – whilst running the risk of becoming an esoteric interlude – actually does two things which seem important. First, it helps to justify the need to translate and/or explain the curiosities of its actual practice. Secondly, it demonstrates shooting's exclusive nature. For, not only is shooting exclusive in terms of membership and cost, performance and personal meaning it is also exclusive on the level of discourse with specific terminology, opaque to the outsider.^{xxvi} It is complex in its character, and is a highly organised and socially regulated practice which merits attention. The above small example not only problematises one critique of shooting and further shows that (in the absence of actual shooting) *there is something about participating in game shooting beyond the physical activity itself*. This less tangible element is shared by other rural sporting activities, there is "the sheer pleasure of driving a team [of horses] through the British countryside" (Telegraph 2004). Outdoor rural activities involve the vagaries of the British climate (particularly given that the shooting calendar runs from the 12 August to the end of January), a Gun standing at peg^{xxvii} (as has been outlined) will not necessarily be doing a large amount of shooting and sociological engagements with other sports, to again use swimming as a comparison, note the sociability *around the activity* (Scott 2009).^{xxviii} Scott argues that conversations (whilst not swimming) are important social processes, as is the negotiated order through which pool users self-regulate and attempt to regulate the behaviour of other users (such as the butterfly kamikaze swimmer). Similarly, in game shooting, what seem to be matters of etiquette are often actually underpinned by issues of safety. For instance, it is not considered appropriate to remove your gun from its sleeve until at peg. It is also very poor form to 'stray' from your peg during a drive – even – perhaps *particularly* – if this puts you into more shooting. Such rules about position exist so that people know where and when you will be shooting. Furthermore, the 'sporting shot' is all a question of judgement – and safety. But the very visibility of the guns to each other provides this pressure to 'demonstrate competence' (cf. Goffman 1952). To be a good shot is therefore not only to shoot well, but to know which birds to leave (those too low, out of range and which are the neighbouring gun's birds)

(Young 2011). To fail in any respect would be to fail to be invited or allowed back to the shoot (indeed, in extreme cases you might be asked to leave there and then – a further aspect of exclusivity). We know shooting to be both exclusive (through cost) and aspirational (for some) (Hillyard 2007a and Heley 2011). But other interesting issues and questions are not raised by the critics of game shooting nor addressed by the sociological community. Whereas Scott's (2009) 'deviations' while swimming are getting kicked, for shooting, the risks are potentially more life-threatening. Given that this is the case, why *do* people shoot? What are the social processes, rituals and etiquette of game shooting and how are these acquired and regulated? To employ the sport's own terminology, what would be a Gun's 'bathtub' moment?^{xxix}

3) 'Shoot whatever gives you pleasure': the meaning and social practice of game shooting and its social control

Metaphors of visibility and control and the regulation of rural spaces through observation (everybody knowing everybody else) and gossip are well documented (Newby 1985 and Neal and Walters 2008). Scott (2009) offered an 'insider' account of etiquette and regulation at her local swimming pool. Similarly in the acquisition of other, rare forms of sport/ display, Delamont (2009) talks about the very ethnographic challenge to access how sporting and intangible skills are communicated. Here, two female researchers traced the acquisition and then demonstration of competence and showed the need for the complexity of that sporting form to be understood. The *social* role of participation therefore needs to be similarly appreciated – and being a 'good shot' beyond the simple firing of a gun competently. So what aspects of behaviour are on display and open to impression management? Or does the wearing of full tweed in a rural pub always risk the derisive "who does he think he is, the Duke of Bedford?" (Heley 2010:326).

At stake are matters of, what game shot Barnes (2005) terms 'conduct and kit' and, we add, how they bear upon maintaining safety (i.e. self-regulation). One popular legend is of the mobile phone of a gun ringing during a drive (and then being thrown in the air and shot to pieces by the irate gamekeeper) and the reasons here are two-fold. One, that the sound would disturb the birds being driven towards the guns – potentially turning them back and ruining the drive. Second is the risk of distraction during shooting. Awareness is hence essential – to know where people are to your left and right (the flanking beaters at the end of the line of guns, for instance) and knowledge of when the drive has begun and ended (variously indicated by whistle/ horn).

The movable and unpredictable organisation of a day (whether the shooting of ground game is permitted) impact upon where a gun can be pointed and fired and when it is loaded or even risks becoming blocked – "obvious advice, but often overlooked" (Barnes 2005, p. 133). So, such cardinal sins as moving "off-peg", loading early, shooting low birds are all in effect informed by safety.

Competence and its acquisition are also nuanced. Delamont (2009) discusses the importance of movement, embodiment and the acquisition of skill and Roderick (2006) enhances our understanding of the performance of a work ethic as well as the intrinsic pleasure of exercising skill. In this context, this unravels the network of influences coming into play to inform the game shoot's experiences. Participants need to focus upon listening for breaking game birds (and non-game birds); read the pattern of flight and; (amongst a covey) upon which to focus; to mentally 'mark' where shot birds have landed for retrieving after the drive; to distinguish between hen and cock pheasants when on the wing if there is a restriction on

hens, or even English birds in a French partridge shoot. These are the decisions a game shot will be required to take quickly during a drive^{xxx} and in the proximity of other Guns in the line, usually all within vision. Hence transgressions are readily obvious – as is the unsafe Gun and so, as mentioned already, what is and is not sporting intertwines with safety. Indeed, to be sporting may involve *not firing*, such as when leaving birds for a neighbouring Gun who has been out of the shooting. Hence, the recent LACS' (2011b) critique of how long it took for a dog to retrieve a pricked bird – that is, a bird that is shot but not killed cleanly – (some thirty seconds) was not well-directed as it fails to understand that to move from peg to retrieve such a bird in a shooting line during a drive would be dangerous. Neither does it distinguish between the roles of the different social actors in that context, such as those: dedicated to retrieving the birds.

Collectively this suggests that game shooting is a 'total' sport requiring strong focus or emersion in order for the practice to be understood fully. Other more recent theoretical work by sociologists applying actor-network theory is useful here and extends the theme of an embodied and sensory understanding of experience, as it permits an understanding of how humans engage (successfully or not) with machines and such non-agency apparatus (Moreira 2008). The shotgun is one such thing, a highly decorative and expensive piece of – potentially lethal – metal and wood. The importance both of fit (to protect from recoil) and of aesthetic (a gun from an established gunsmith being an investment as well as a utility) combine. In instances where shotguns have been inherited, even more attachment is formed beyond other sporting paraphernalia. The simultaneous actions of taking the safety off, mounting and 'swing' all need to work seamlessly in the effective performance of skill (Roderick 2006, Young 2011). Finally, the effective dog-handling and reading of both dog and ground conditions by a gun is a facet missed in academic discussions on game shooting, such as Heley (2010).^{xxx}

The meaning and practice of game shooting involves technical competence, wealth, a predisposition towards the embodied experience of being in the British countryside and – more often than not – the sociability of the shoot lunch.^{xxxii} Whilst Mark Twain famously suggested golf is 'a good walk spoiled', this brief explication may offer sufficient *verstehen* to show that participation in shooting has master status above a good lunch.

Conclusions: key future questions – beyond regulation.

The critique of shooting has by some been seen as the 'thin end of the wedge', or as the second step on a slippery slope after the ban on hunting with dogs. Concern about whether other country sports now risk being restricted echo the way that shooting was often constructed as being next in line as part of arguments against the banning of fox-hunting (see for example, Thomas 1983: 130; Scruton 1998, pp. 121-122; Hoey in Hansard, 2003, col. 102; Countryside Alliance 2003). The mobilisation of arguments in defence of shooting and potential similarities to those made in defence of other country sports is a key question to engage with, notably given that fishing and stalking are essentially solitary activities, whereas game shooting involves teamwork. Yet some analyses (cf. Smith 2006) purely focus upon the latent power of gun ownership, revealing nothing of the self-regulation in the shooting field itself shown to be key here.

Cox et al.'s (1996) suspicion of 'political correctness' explaining the inattention paid to shooting is perhaps too strong. But for every study of the tartan army, is there not room for one of tweed (Guilannotti 2005)? Cox acknowledges that to have some personal affinity with

an activity does not render a social scientist's critical judgement obsolete and it is essential that the assumptions of the commentator (pro or anti) do not curtail a sustained and serious engagement with a legitimate topic (Pole 2010).^{xxxiii} That game shooting is exclusive is clear, but whether it is sporting and the very notion of sporting behaviour in the field is a debate that is yet to be constructed, and is one which should preferably take place before the political and policy debate is shut down. Essentially, multiple aspects of the definition of the situation warrant detailed analytical exploration: from the significance of rural space to the practice the dynamics of categorisation of the species concerned as either quarry or as vermin^{xxxiv}, as well as the acquisition of knowledge of all aspects of both good and poor conduct within the field.

The empirical challenge in studying any practice is one of access in order to be able to evoke a 'jolt' of insight (Thrift 2010). That is, to have sufficient perception to ask the interesting questions, in the same way that Cox et al. (1996) demonstrated their awareness of how receptive research participants might be to the distribution of a questionnaire at the end of shoot day (the answer being: entirely unsympathetic). Such work is necessary to compliment the wider body of knowledge already established, as in ecologist Dick Potts' metaphor that sound game management is like a three-legged stool: habitat, food supply and protection.^{xxxv} An understanding of game shooting participation in the UK is hence not just about one element and it should not be understood and evaluated as such. Given it is an elitist and closed world, it will be difficult and challenging to access ethically and ethnographically, given its highly ritualistic and nuanced character (Delamont 2009). Is a sociologist ready to metaphorically risk, the shooting equivalent of the bloody nose risked by Wacquant (2004) in his inculcation into the boxing world?

We can see in Heley (2010, 2011) calls for an insider account that informs good questions. Whilst his own delivery perhaps sat on the alternative side of the fence to those he elected to research (the 'village boy' with family dating back to the seventeenth century researching newcomers), he raised the importance of class. Indeed, game shooting also needs to be legally and socially permissible and whether it is a form of cultural expression that is cumulative and reinforcing of capital. The question of accumulation is an interesting one and that must be related to class analysis:

In order for a resource to become a form of capital, it needs to be shown that there are systemic processes allowing the garnering of such resources by those who possess it. There are two candidates for this: money capital and cultural capital (Savage et al. 2005:45).

As Warde (2009) has acknowledged, in any such discussion, it will be vital to capture what people do, rather than what they say they do (Bennett et al 2009). Power and new patronage is undoubtedly at work in instances where a 'keeper cannot (or will not) reprimand a paying visitor for shooting at low birds. Is shooting an exclusively 'old boy network' (Scott 1992) and does this explain women's marginal or periphery roles in an activity exploited for networking opportunities (Heley 2010)? Hence game shooting potentially becomes an important site where capital crosses fields (Bourdieu 1989) and hence accumulates. Criminality in the practice of game shooting, in this light, is only one dimension of something more complex. That is, the acquisition of game shooting competence is the manifestation of a power elite recreating and maintaining itself (the emergence of a 'new rural squirearchy' or otherwise). This would not therefore be "*playing* at being lord of the manor" regardless of how Bourdieu favoured the metaphor (Heley 2010: 330, emphasis added). As Bottomore (1965) notes: "the concept of elites [...] refers to an observable social phenomenon and takes

its place in theories which seek to explain social happenings, especially political changes” (Bottomore 1964:14). Are game shots a new, younger (pseudo-rural) power elite, whose very participation and movement into this activity will effectively perpetuate its existence, through economic and symbolic (non-violent) maintenance? A distinctively, empirically-informed sociological contribution to the debate seems merited. One final irony is that game shooting, whilst exclusive and elitist, once in the field is a great leveller. For, as in any other sport, some have more innate ability than others – matching Purdey’s^{xxxvi} notwithstanding.

Biographies

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ⁱ We use this term in preference to the more charged 'bloodsports'.

ⁱⁱ i.e. Prince Harry's alleged involvement in the shooting of two hen harriers in Norfolk in late October 2007 (NGO 2007).

ⁱⁱⁱ For instance, "how and why rules or norms have become what they are at a given time is not systematically explored" (Elias 1998 [1986], p. 100).

^{iv} Firearms Select Committee (see <http://www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/commons-select/home-affairs-committee/inquiries/firearms-control/>)

^v Rural sociology in the US has long enjoyed a higher profile than its UK counterpart.

^{vi} See the websites of League Against Cruel Sports and Countryside Alliance contained pages listing the 'usual' arguments of their opponents, along with counter-arguments – an example of sophisticated intertextuality/'heteroglossia' (Burridge 2008).

^{vii} Chair, select committee review.

^{viii} Interestingly, the NRA's foundations were to improve rifle-shooting competence in 1871. It now has a clear policy mandate, embodied by its Institute for Legislative Action wing.

^{ix} The suggestion of unity implied in the term community is challenged in a later section.

^x At the beginning of 'countryside week' in the UK, a survey of 600 people conducted by the Prince's Countryside Fund found 93 'valued' the countryside for relaxation (Farming Today 2011).

^{xi} Shotgun certificates vastly outnumber firearm certificates.

^{xii} Firearms officers are often retired police officers.

^{xiii} In 1996, Thomas Hamilton killed 16 primary schoolchildren and their teacher in Dunblane, with four legally-owned handguns.

^{xiv} See the outcome of the Cumbria police inquiry into the licensing of Derrick Bird (Association of Chief Police Officers Firearms & Explosives Licensing Working Group 2010a, 2010b).

^{xv} This is managed in that the shotgun is only loaded once in the 'cage' or stand, the only location where the gun is permitted to be fired. Indeed, clay shooting is stage managed to the extent that the gun 'calls' for the clay to be released and is permitted sight of its trajectory in advance. And flight speed and pattern of a bird is far more varied and unpredictable than a clay (regardless of vagaries of weather and wind) as a clay is decelerating from launch, whereas a bird will be accelerating.

^{xvi} The imagery of such species permeates the very apparel and 'country' attire (Goodrum and Hunt forthcoming). These, effectively, are culturally celebrated species.

^{xvii} For example, a bird that can be shot and killed cleanly, and then retrieved safely.

^{xviii} A sport that *has* received recent sociological attention using participant research techniques (Scott 2009, Throsby 2011).

^{xix} Walk for one drive and then stand (at a peg) the next. This keeps costs down and is hence not a purely driven day.

^{xx} Total number of birds shot.

^{xxi} Guns usually number eight or nine, more on a rough day.

^{xxii} 'Tip' by name, but compulsory in practice.

^{xxiii} A dog or team of dogs is an essential aspect of a shoot day. They fulfil a vital role in retrieving game quickly and safely.

^{xxiv} Peg numbers are drawn at the beginning of the day at random.

^{xxv} 'The bag' is the total of the number of birds shot at the end of the day. The figure will have been anticipated in advance and monitored during the day.

^{xxvi} As is hunting (Cox et al. 1994a).

^{xxvii} The expectation is to remain at peg for the duration of the drive.

^{xxviii} Swimming, for dedicated swimmers such as Scott (2009), is highly interactionally curtailed; steamed-up goggles limit vision and submersion in the water during strokes curtails hearing. No interaction with others is intrinsically necessary as it is in team sports and, as Scott (2009) notes, can be undesired.

^{xxix} That is, the highlight of the day, which the game shot remembers (when home and relaxing – or de-frosting – in a hot bath)?

^{xxx} And, of course, the flight speed and pattern of a bird is far more varied and unpredictable than a clay, regardless of vagaries of weather and wind, as a clay is decelerating from launch, whereas a bird will be accelerating as it takes to the wing.

^{xxxi} Graham Cox, however, has on shooting and dog handling (Deeley and Cox 1987).

^{xxxii} Interestingly, rarely do beaters and guns eat together. The elitism/exclusivity of shooting is returned to in the conclusion.

^{xxxiii} Indeed, our own views on the practice as we have made clear are not aligned at all, yet have not inhibited collaboration to analyse it sociologically. Hence a moral evaluation is not essential.

^{xxxiv} The gardening saying ‘a rose in the wrong place is a weed’ is useful here. Hence a rabbit kept in a hutch in a back garden is a pet; one stripping crops in a field is a pest.

^{xxxv} “Like a three-legged stool, all legs must be present for it to stand up” (Sotherton 2009, unpaginated).

^{xxxvi} A famous English shotgun manufacturer.